MONTANA LEGISLATIVE SERVICES DIVISION   Office of Research and Policy Analysis

ORPA

INTERNET AND ONLINE NEWSPAPER ACCESS IN MONTANA

BACKGROUND

At the November LGIC meeting, Senator Bogner requested information regarding internet access and newspaper subscription numbers in Montana.

Montana citizens increasingly see improved internet access. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) compiles data on the number and available speeds of internet providers. As of December 2020, the FCC reported that 100% of Montana citizens have access to at least one internet provider offering speeds of 25/3 Mbps (megabytes per second) while only 5.85% have access to fast connection speeds of 1000/100 Mbps or greater[1]. However, verifying the data proves difficult since it is derived from information found on voluntarily submitted internet service provider forms. Current FCC data also may not adequately capture the challenges to provide internet in hard to service areas.

> Gathering data on internet connectivity proves difficult, creating a muddy, but possibly clearing, picture with new funding on the horizon.

The National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) offers a potentially more robust data set with information gathered from multiple sources including the FCC, U.S. Census Bureau, USDA, state governments, and private entities[2].

Additionally, numerous factors including age, education and income levels, comfort with technology acquisition, and confidence in technology security contribute to a citizen's decision to subscribe to internet service regardless of whether service is available.

---

[1] Federal Communications Commission, Fixed Broadband Deployment – Area Comparison of Broadband Availability in Different Areas. https://broadbandmap.fcc.gov/#/
[2] Other sources include the Universal Service Administrative Company, Ookla, Measurement Lab (M-Lab), Microsoft, BroadbandNow, and White Star. More information may be accessed at: https://www.ntia.doc.gov/press-release/2021/ntia-creates-first-interactive-map-help-public-see-digital-divide-across-country

1

INTERNET CONNECTIVITY OPTIONS – WHAT IS "FAST" INTERNET?

The FCC defines broadband internet as a connection with a minimum download speed of 25 Mbps and upload speed of 3 Mbps (read 25/3 Mbps). Speed below 25/3 Mbps is not considered broadband but may not necessarily be "too slow" depending on a user's needs.

Connection speeds of at least 100/10 Mbps can often handle multiple users or devices while still adequately streaming video, operating video calls, and downloading large files. Many consider any speed below 25/3 Mbps "slow internet" since users often experience slow buffering speeds, difficulty connecting multiple devices, and difficulty accessing Wi-Fi connections.[3]

Time it takes to download a 4 GB file
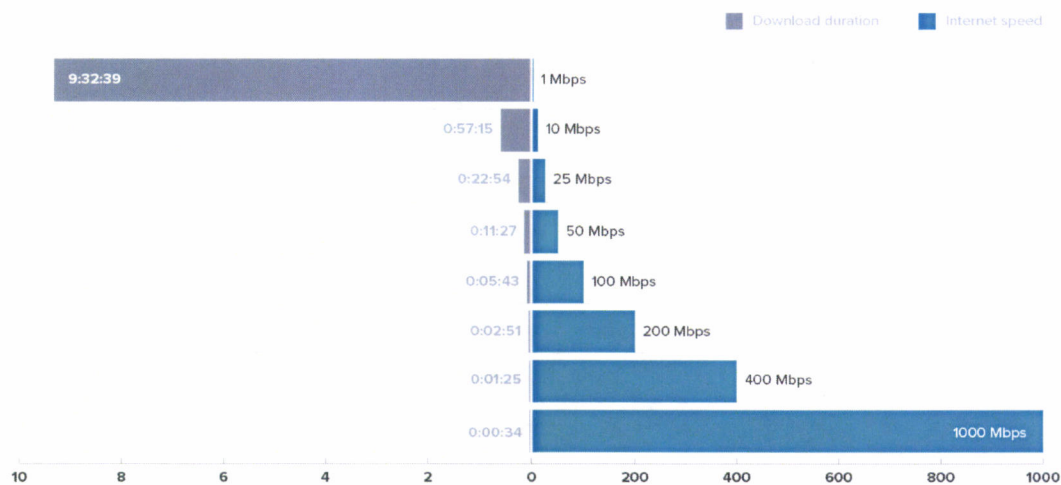
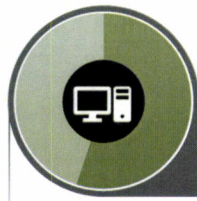| FCC Data - Percentage of MT Population with access to:				
Connection Speed*	**No Providers**	**1 or more Providers**	**2 or more Providers**	**3 or more Providers**
≥ 1000/100 Mbps	94.15%	5.85%	0%	0%
≥ 250/25 Mbps	33.35%	66.65%	3.63%	0.13%
≥ 100/10 Mbps	25.69%	74.31%	14.65%	2.43%
≥ 25/3 Mbps	0%	100%	100%	94.93%

* Types of technology included: ADSL, Cable, Fiber, Fixed Wireless, Satellite, Other

---

[3] "Internet speed classifications: What is a good internet speed?", AllConnect. https://www.allconnect.com/blog/internet-speed-classifications-what-is-fast-internet
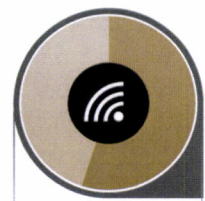
LEGISLATIVE SERVICES DIVISION

NTIA DATA

As noted in the introduction, FCC data may not paint a complete picture. The National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) produces a "National Broadband Availability Map" (NBAM) which uses additional data sources. The following table lists internet access by county, collected as part of the U.S. Census American Community Survey (ACS) results from 2015-2019.

County	Total households	Percent of Households that Have No Computer, Smartphone, or Tablet	Percent of Households with No Internet Access
Beaverhead	3992	11.2	17.6
Big Horn	3609	21.7	28.3
Blaine	2366	18.4	24.8
Broadwater	2364	12.5	21.5
Carbon	4524	11.8	17.9
Carter	628	13.5	18.2
Cascade	34329	15.8	20.2
Chouteau	2274	23	25.3
Custer	4903	13.3	18.9
Daniels	857	20	22.5
Dawson	3930	15.2	20.3
Deer Lodge	3903	16.3	24.2
Fallon	1334	12.3	17.5
Fergus	4912	12.3	17.7
Flathead	38773	9.8	12.9
Gallatin	43777	5.2	8.9
Garfield	438	17.4	20.5
Glacier	4163	28.5	30.7
Golden Valley	351	23.9	26.5
Granite	1308	16.8	18.3
Hill	6369	13	17.3
Jefferson	4484	9.7	15.1
Judith Basin	906	14.8	18.5

3.5%
• Average Margin of Error – Households reporting no computer, smartphone, or tablet

4.0%
• Average Margin of Error – Households reporting no internet access

Lake	11802	11	18.6
Lewis and Clark	27893	9.5	14.1
Liberty	895	16.2	25
Lincoln	8122	16.2	19
McCone	723	17.4	23
Madison	3570	12.5	16.3
Meagher	702	20.1	28.1
Mineral	1786	15.6	31.1
Missoula	49313	7	10.8
Musselshell	2181	18.2	21.7
Park	7782	11.2	14.6
Petroleum	204	14.7	14.2
Phillips	1710	19	25.1
Pondera	2103	15.1	22.2
Powder River	737	9.4	10.9
Powell	2426	11.4	21.1
Prairie	518	17.2	19.3
Ravalli	17354	9.6	15.3
Richland	4535	14	19.2
Roosevelt	3150	23.5	31.7
Rosebud	3166	19.1	25.8
Sanders	5036	19.5	26
Sheridan	1639	8.7	13.7
Silver Bow	14960	15.9	18.4
Stillwater	3761	9.2	14.8
Sweet Grass	1566	16.3	20.9
Teton	2464	12.9	20.6
Toole	1867	15.5	17.8
Treasure	351	11.4	20.5
Valley	3386	12.3	17
Wheatland	792	19.7	24
Wibaux	498	15.5	28.7
Yellowstone	66385	8.5	12.1

20.09%

- Average percentage of households in **ALL** counties reporting no internet access

LEGISLATIVE
SERVICES
DIVISION

MANY TYPES OF CONNECTIONS

The number of Montanans with internet access is also challenging to capture due to the many types of internet connections available, all with varying levels of effectiveness depending on geographic location and available infrastructure. The following map illustrates the state's fiberoptic network, as reported by the Montana Telecommunications Association and its member providers. Fiber is considered one of the more stable, reliable, and fast connections. However, fiber also presents one of the largest installation challenges – both logistically and financially.
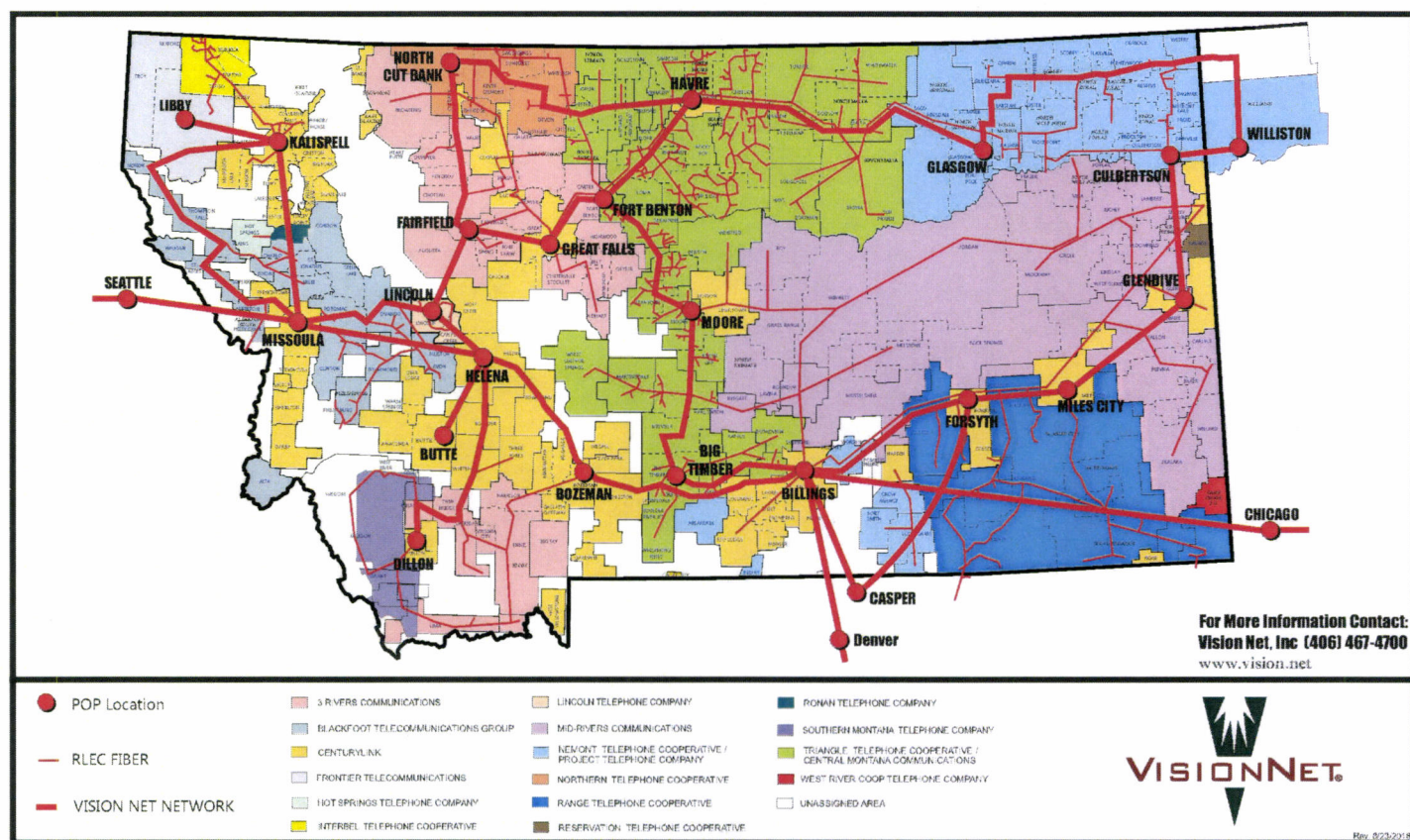
Mobile and satellite networks may service difficult to reach areas. However, these networks often lack reliability and/or high-speed connections.

Finally, regardless of connection availability, the costs of internet subscriptions, fees, hardware, or other devices necessary to adequately use an internet connection may prove a barrier to internet access, further challenging a clear picture of the number of citizens with internet access in Montana.

LEGISLATIVE SERVICES DIVISION

THE FUTURE IS LOOKING BRIGHT

Both the federal and state governments have made steps to finance additional broadband opportunities for citizens, indicating that the number of internet-connected citizens may increase over the next 5 years.

FEDERAL	STATE

Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA)[4]

Broadband equity, access, & deployment – $42.5 billion

- $100 million per state minimum
- Prioritizes unserved ($\leq$25/3Mbps) and underserved ($\leq$100/20Mbps) areas
- 25% state match

Broadband affordability - $14.2 billion

- $30 per month subsidy for qualifying low-income households
- $100 to broadband providers for each discounted device sold to qualifying low-income households (household must pay at least $10 and no more than $50 for the device)

Digital Equity Grant Program - $2.75 billion over 5 yrs

- Helps states fund digital equity plans
- Grants to local gov'ts, tribes, community anchor institutions, educational agencies, etc.

Existing program support

- USDA ReConnect & Rural Broadband Programs – loans & grants to rural areas – additional $2.74 billion
- Tribal Broadband Connectivity Program – additional $2 billion

SB297 (2021) – ConnectMT Act

- $500,000 for broadband infrastructure projects in unserved ($\leq$25/3Mbps) and underserved ($\leq$100/20Mbps) areas

HB632 (2021) – ARPA Fund Deployment

- $275 million for communication projects related to broadband infrastructure
- Communications Advisory Commission oversees program

---

[4] "Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act", National Council of State Legislatures. https://www.ncsl.org/ncsl-in-dc/publications-and-resources/infrastructure-investment-and-jobs-act.aspx#Broadband%20Infrastructure

MONTANA NEWSPAPER ONLINE SUBSCRIPTIONS

Number of Montana Newspaper Association (MNA) member publications: **79**[5]

Number of newspapers with online options:

> **71** – online subscriptions available
>
> **3** – free online access to all articles:
>> Lone Peak Lookout (Big Sky)
>> Silver State Post (Deer Lodge) – *most, not all articles available online at no cost*
>> Kootenai Valley Record (Libby)
>
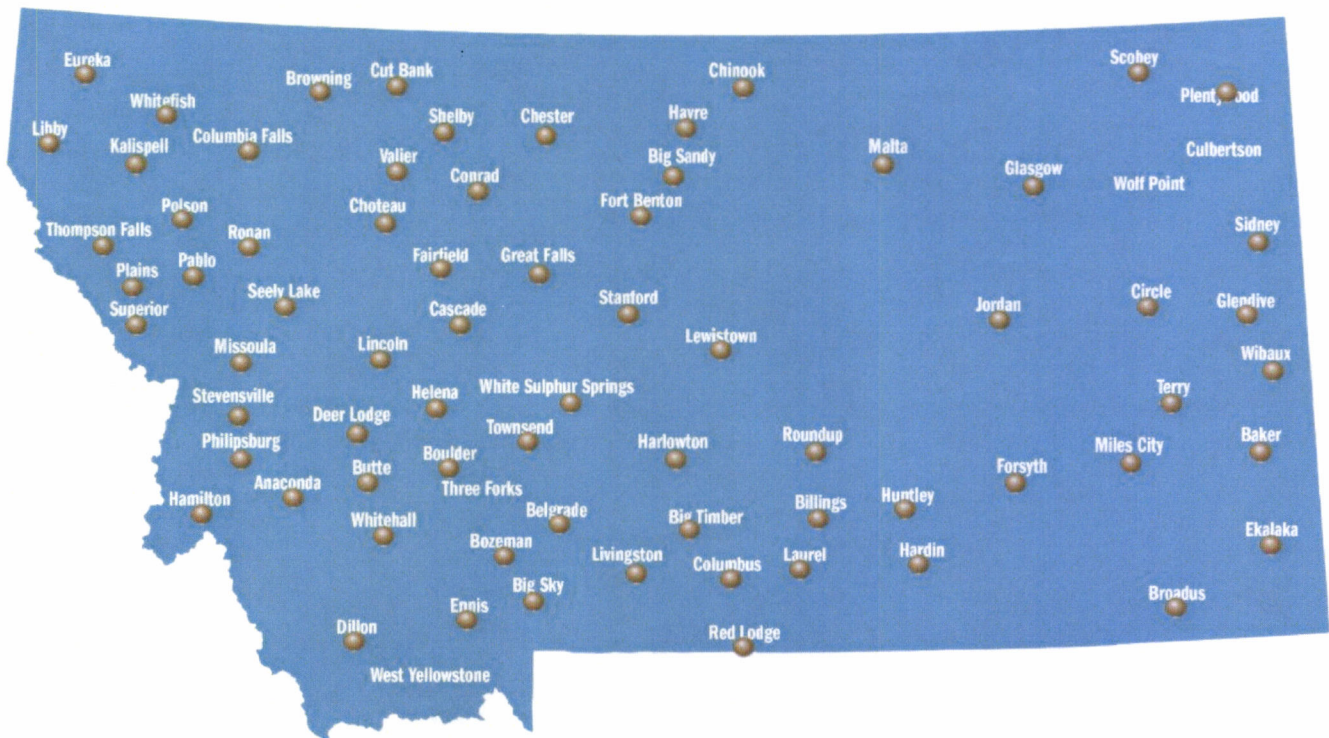> **5** – no online access:
>> Anaconda Leader
>> The Times-Clarion (Harlowton)
>> Jordan Tribune (Jordan)
>> Sheridan County News (Plentywood)
>> Meagher County News (White Sulphur Springs)

MT Newspaper Assoc. Membership Directory Map

[5] All information, including map, gathered from the Montana Newspaper Association website: https://www.mtnewspapers.com/.
Online access determined by visiting individual newspaper websites on December 15 & 16, 2021.